

Nina Zivancevic 2011 interview of Joseph Nechvatal
for A Gathering Of The Tribes



Joseph Nechvatal, *Art rétinale revisitée: histoire de l'oeil*, 2010, installation
view

Nina Zivancevic: *When and how did you decide to become an artist?*

Joseph Nechvatal: This might sound a little strange Nina, but I made the decision to be an artist rather suddenly: in one night and in a split second.

I was a sophomore at University pursuing a degree in Sociology, deeply involved in the political/social issues of the early 1970s; i.e. the anti-war, woman's liberation and equal rights movements. I was home in Chicago for the summer, working at some shit job to pay for my University expenses. Art had been a hobby-interest with me up to that point. Anyway, I was riding around downtown Chicago on a motorcycle, somewhat in a psychic funk. As I zoomed pass some cathedral, a large illuminated stain-glass window caught my eye. It was an intense moment of color in a black night. Something told me then and there that the way to social change was the way of art - in that art addresses the inner unique individual rather than the group, the sociological statistical. In that sense I saw art as a means to foster social change from the bottom-up, rather than top down, if you will.

So bing. That was it. I felt compelled to go around the city and photograph stain-glassed windows for the rest of the summer. I wanted to try to understand what had happened to me. Back at University I changed my major to studio art and never regretted it for an instant.

Nina Zivancevic: *Where does your fascination with technology come from? Why this particular genre - electronic medium - and not something else?*

Joseph Nechvatal: As you can tell Nina by what I just told you, I see art as a means of practicing politics on one level. In the mid-1980s I could already observe the coming rise of electronic media (computational media, more precisely) as the controlling, organizing force of social power. I felt that to adequately address this topic I should approach it from inside of electronic medium, and not from an artisanal pre-electronic practice.

Nina Zivancevic: *Could you elaborate on your idea of using art as a means of practicing politics?*

Joseph Nechvatal: The key political notion for me concerning art is *omnijectivity*, which is the concept stemming from the discoveries of quantum physics which teaches us that mind (previously considered the subjective realm) and matter (previously considered as the objective realm) are inextricably linked. It is a political concept for me because omnijectivity is possible only with the conflation of polarities; a stance which recognizes the mutual interpenetration that unites apparent opposites (specifically the subjectivity and objectivity). For me art which takes seriously such scientific understanding supersedes the tabular space laid out by classical political thought. A new sort of political art then may promote a non-teleological noology that makes use of the mutual interpenetrational and rhizomatic nature of the thought process typical of the art experience - multiplicitous and heterogeneous.

For me, the basic function of a new sort of political art is to create mental spaces that allow unaccustomed creative situations and sensations to connect socially. My idea of a political art is where the particular is seen as part of an accrual total system by virtue of its being connected to everything else. The strategy of hyper-anything includes principles of networked connections and electronic links that give multiple choices of passages to follow and continually new branching possibilities. The total-hyper-being model for a new connected political art is the self-re-programmable internal function that explicitly offers a furtherance in envisioning anti-hierarchical models of political thought to ourselves.

Nina Zivancevic: *How do you relate your art to contemporary performance and theater, such as Pina Baush's? What does it mean to you - and to your work, to your inspiration, to see such giants of performance?*

Joseph Nechvatal: An early formative experience I had, in this respect, was the time I attended The Jimi Hendrix Experience concert December 1, 1968 at the Chicago Coliseum and sat in the very last row – far far away from the stage. Hendrix appeared miniscule, however the speakers were located just behind my head and the sound was earsplitting; an intensely pleasant, if disjunctive, experience. This experience of technologically pulling things apart was stunning for me as it suggested an explosion that collage implosion implies.

Working as an archivist for LaMonte Young, meeting John Cage, and learning of the famous "9 Evenings: Theatre and Engineering" of 1966 that Robert Rauschenberg helped organize with the engineer Billy Kluver was salient to my formation in this regard. Rauschenberg understood that through the mediation of chance and machines, the technological built-in can be contorted, thus changing our awareness of what technology is or can be. Surely I have a great appreciation of Merce Cunningham's dance company. In the mid-1970s I moved to New York City into the Tribeca area. I was dating a dancer at the time who's prior boyfriend worked for Bob Rauschenberg and one day we went to Rauschenberg's studio on Lafayette for a visit, but he was not in. Still he soon came to represent for me an exemplary artist, one engaged in political concerns tied to technological means. He seemed to me capable of harnessing both the forces of explosion and implosion that manifested a new hyper-rhizomatic era in the making. This was an era in which the new technologies of media distribution, virtual

systems, computer networks, and information processing began supplanting industrial production and the gold-based economy as the organizing synthesis/principle of society.

Nina Zivancevic: *You've worked with theory a lot. Is it important for an artist and what did this theoretical approach do for you; for your creative expression?*

Joseph Nechvatal: I can say that it has been important for me. When I read Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari describe non-hierarchical networks of all kinds in their seminal book *A Thousand Plateaus*, my mind was liberated and this fostered a wave of creativity in me. Through my reading (and thinking through) of Deleuze-Guattari I came to hypothesize (and hopefully demonstrate through my art) a counter-mannerist approach to life based on principles of latent excess. The idea was to establish a new critical distance via viral excess, a critical distance which Jean Baudrillard pessimistically had claimed was no longer possible.

Through latent excess I wanted to establish an ambiguous private critical distance: a distance achieved through the challenge of (and disparity between) pleasurable frustration. This means an art that demands of society an active visualizing participation in private interpretations - and thus is a legitimate metaphor for contemporary art as a form of simulation-shattering engagement.

During the time I was engaged in these ideas, the notion of the simulation was prevalent. I chose to argue for the contrary (de-simulation); that is, a post-pop art that would be fundamental to free thought by demonstrating how an art of counter-mannerist latent excess (produced in the

Baudrillardian milieu of image superabundance and information proliferation) is an art that can problematise the pop simulacra and hence enliven us to the privateness - and unique separateness - of the human condition in lieu of the fabulously constructed social spectacle which engulfs and (supposedly) controls us. My idea was that this private separateness could offer us a personal critical distance (gap), and thus another perspective on (and from) the given social simulacra.

My hope was that such an art of latent viral excess (circuitous, extravagant and décadent) might provide us with two essential aspects relevant to our lives. First, it can provide a private context in which to suitably understand our simulacra situation. Secondly (but more importantly) it may then undermine this understanding of the simulacra by overwhelming our immersion in the customary simulacra – along with our own prudent pose as observer and judge. Through the destructive-creative bacchanalia at the root of an art of latent excess we might be prodded to lose our position of detached observer, as it is a style of art that demands our engaged intellectual and perceptual production. For me that meant that I had to develop a viral style which takes us from the state of the social to the state of the secret distinguishable “I” by overloading ideological representation to a point where it becomes non-representational. It is this non-representational counter-mannerist representation which I think can break us out of the fascination and complicity with pop information and the mass media mode of communication.

Nina Zivancevic: *Can art be taught in school - to an artist? If yes - Is it important?*

Joseph Nechvatal: I think it can be taught, and it is, but that does not mean that it is the only route to becoming an artist. As a teacher at the School of Visual Arts in New York City I stress passing along knowledge about radical art ideas and dada art techniques. I tell the students about what some notable recent artists have done - and expose them to the work directly. I intentionally avoid suggesting to the students what kind of art to make or how to make it. That is their own personal quest, in my view. What is important is for the pre-artist to be inner driven to become an artist regardless of the fact that it is a frustrating way to lead a life.

Nina Zivancevic: *What do you think about contemporary American art scene? Any movement you admire?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes I admire certain American artist who work primarily digitally, such as Bill Seaman, Frank Gillette, Victoria Vesna, Robert Lazzarini, G.H. Hovagimyan and Michael Reese. Of course artificial life art is one of my keen interests, the basis of my computer virus work. For me artificial life is a way to do magic by any means necessary. The sculptor Ken Rinaldo is a very good artist in this realm.

Also there are what I might call digital conceptualists in the USA that interest me, such as Jenny Holzer, Patrick Lichty, Suzanne Anker, Kenneth Goldsmith and Matthew Ritchie. I also have a keen interest in audio art that deals with noise and/or ambience and have been following the career of Phillip B. Klingler (PBK), Minoy, Randy Grief and others over the years. Some painters as well hold my interest, like Benjamin Edwards, David Reed, Carl Fudge, Chris Finley and Shirley Kaneda. But can we really speak of art in terms of nationality any more? What about fantastic European and

Asian artist that sometimes work in the US, like Carlos Casado, Gilles Barbier, Merzbow, Pascal Dombis and Matthias Groebel? It is only a certain quality of thought and sensibility that I admire. Not their passport.

However, I'm not very interested in artists that use capture technology anymore (straight photography and video). What engages me is the meeting of art, science and technology in the virtual land of the digital - because I think that digital technology allows and facilitates changes in consciousness by primarily allowing artists to act differently with new tools. For example, digital painters, like myself, work and think much differently from traditional painters through their mastering of digital tools.

This digital realm connects to a new sensibility that I am feeling which I have called Cybism. It is a sensibility based on my observation that art and science, after centuries of separation, are becoming entangled again through the discreditation of the concept – one might say presumption – of objectivity. Richard Rorty writes persuasively about this as does Manuel Delanda; particularly in his book *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*.

Nina Zivancevic: *Any tendency you despise?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes. The “bad painting” (or “MFA outsider art”) movement disgusts me. It is both ugly to behold and stupid to contemplate. It seems blatantly a creature of top-down marketing to me (think pyramid scheme) and as such it, or any market driven art, will not stand the smell test of time.

Nina Zivancevic: *How is it different from the French scene? Advantages of the French?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Oh la la! Though there are elements of globalized marketing in Paris, the French scene is much smaller. It is marginal by comparison - and this can be a good thing. For example I have experienced in France a wonderful sense of collaborative community and have established important relationships, like with my artificial life programmer Stephane Sikora. The philosophy and music scenes here are superior to those in the USA, in my estimation.

One feels in France a sense of preservation of artistic ideals, such as the idea of art performing a visionary function, which at this juncture seems increasingly important given the homogenization of thought and perception that has been taking place.

Nina Zivancevic: *Disadvantages?*

Joseph Nechvatal: No baseball.

